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ON PAGE 4-1

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U.S. Covert Actions Said Not Unusual

By Joanne Omang
Washington Post Staff Writer

Covert U.S. military or paramilitary operations that seriously worry some members of Congress are taking place "in a couple of other parts of the world" besides Central America, House Intelligence subcommittee Chairman Wyche Fowler Jr. (D-Ga.) said yesterday.

Fowler, who did not specify the location or mission of the covert operations, said American intelligence agencies are going ahead with them despite objections from some congressmen that they could be counterproductive for the United States.

As Fowler was disclosing this at a House Intelligence Committee hearing, the Senate Intelligence Committee voted 13 to 2 to provide \$19 million in fiscal 1984 to continue covert U.S. support for the guerrilla forces fighting the leftist Sandinista government in Nicaragua, according to a committee source.

The Senate committee vote, in which most Democrats voted with the Republican majority, endorses the Reagan administration's new rationale for the covert operation in Central America and sets the stage for legislative conflict with the House, which has voted to stop it.

In an open hearing of the House Intelligence Committee, Fowler said that such covert military and paramilitary actions tend to start "with 10 men and \$1,000" and wind up like the operation against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua, with thousands of fighters supported by millions of dollars, U.S. prestige on the line and a major debate under way.

"We're going to have this same problem here in a couple of other parts of the world in the next few weeks," Fowler said. "They [in the intelligence agencies] want to do some things that, in the judgment of some of us, will have the opposite effect to what we want to accomplish. But they're going to go ahead."

"Congress now can do nothing to stop such programs in advance but can only try to cut funding later when 'it's messy,'" Fowler said.

"We are now undertaking policy initiatives that are not by any means emergencies but they [in the intelligence agencies] say they're going to do them," he continued. "Some of us [on the committee] have been very disappointed in the responses we've had to questions about the potential impact of failure, disclosure or escalation of fighting, 'but they say they're going to go ahead anyway.'"

Fowler spoke at the end of three days of hearings on legislation he has proposed to require that paramilitary or military covert operations be approved beforehand by the House and Senate intelligence committees.

House Intelligence Committee Chairman Edward P. Boland (D-Mass.) said later in an interview that "more questions have to be answered" about the program or programs that Fowler was referring to.

"It all has to be fleshed out a little bit ...," he said. "I'm not sure it's that serious at the present moment."

Nearly all the witnesses called by the committee testified in opposition to Fowler's proposal for legislative curbs, arguing that the president has complete authority to launch covert action under his constitutional mandate to conduct foreign policy. The role of Congress, most witnesses said, must be to advise and raise questions and to cut off funding for programs it opposes.

The House voted 228 to 195 in July to cut off funds for the covert operation in Nicaragua, in which guerrilla forces fighting the Sandinista government are receiving U.S. financing, weapons and advice.

In its action yesterday, however, the Senate Intelligence Committee voted to continue the funding for an estimated six months into 1984, with the understanding that the Reagan administration will have to justify the covert aid again at that time, committee sources said.

The administration asked only for six months' funding, "because it was clear that the committee was reluctant to give a blank check for the year," one source explained.

The vote included most committee Democrats, however, because "they are willing to try" a new approach that was offered in private sessions this week by Secretary of State George P. Shultz and CIA Director William J. Casey, the source said.

The new approach abandons the previous administration explanation that the covert aid was being used only to halt the flow of arms from the Nicaraguan government to leftist rebels in El Salvador.

Now, Shultz and Casey reportedly told the Intelligence Committee, the administration "finding" is that the covert operation is needed to harass the Nicaraguans into abandoning their promotion of "revolution without frontiers" throughout the hemisphere.

The Senate committee was generally receptive to this new goal, regarding it as "more clearly spelled out by the administration than ever before," the source continued. The House Intelligence Committee, however, received the same briefing and "was not at all convinced," a source there said.

The Senate is likely to take up the bill funding all 1984 intelligence activity within the next two weeks. Its expected passage would pave the way for a conference committee fight on Nicaragua, since the House Intelligence Committee version of the measure would eliminate all Nicaragua program funds. The committee bill is not expected to reach the House floor until next month.